

CENTRAL MINNESOTA HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE

Increasing Victim Safety & Offender Accountability - An Intentional, Targeted Response



- Building on experience, expertise, and collaborative buy-in, the Central Minnesota Human Trafficking Task Force (CMHTTF) began full-time operation in April 2018.
- In nearly 3 years, throughout investigator changes, COVID-19, and court system closures, the CMHTTF has responded to 333 trafficking tips from law enforcement, probation, child protection, parents, health department inspectors, and citizens. CMHTTF has initiated over 150 separate potential cases.
- Convictions so far: 15 sex traffickers, 10 child solicitation offenders, and 74 sex buyers. 10 more traffickers are charged/pending trial now.
- Our proactive response has so far identified 168 adult and 51 juvenile sex trafficking victims.
- Traffickers are commonly career criminals, selling drugs and persons for profit. Drug addiction has been involved in most if not all victim identifications and recoveries so far.
- Traditional law enforcement investigations and victim advocacy services are inadequate to address the combined dynamics of domestic violence, sexual assault, gang influence, chemical dependency and mental health challenges for vulnerable, mobile victims.
- Juvenile victims remain hardest to detect, as they are less likely to be found, to report, or to maintain safety once they are identified.
- **Existing statutes need updating to reflect the severity of these crimes & fix archaic standards of public/private place sex buying.**

Our Work to Stop Sex Trafficking

- **Law enforcement, prosecutors and courts use existing domestic violence, sexual assault, drug and gang expertise** to respond; the cases are fully as difficult to investigate and prosecute as expected. 333 tips have been analyzed so far. Reporting and cooperation of victims in prosecutions remains a huge challenge – we are working to meaningfully reach victims and collaborating with our partners to do so.
- **Sexual assault advocates and social services interventions are critical for victims who do not report to law enforcement.** Trained and specialized trauma-informed professionals are at the table, essential to victim identification and long/short term victim safety. 157 trafficking victims have been served by the Central Minnesota Sexual Assault Center (CMSAC) in the past 3 years alone, involving 1,737 hours of services.
- **Housing and legal resources are intertwined with victim safety and stability.** Terebinth Refuge provides housing and support for up to 14 adult trafficking victims, serving 87 women and 4 children since April 2018. Services include medical, mental health, employment readiness and independent living skills. Legal Aid, with existing expertise in domestic violence victim legal issues, is critical for trauma-informed victim services.
- **At risk youth assessment and intervention tools have been developed.** Stearns County Child Protection, Law Enforcement agencies and the Stearns County Attorney's Office screen cases daily to identify high risk runaways. 55 high risk juveniles have been identified since April 2018; approximately 25% of these children have been or are at risk of being trafficked.
- **In March 2020, the Minnesota Court of Appeals called upon the Legislature to remove the difference in criminal consequences for solicitation in a public versus private place.** These updates are now before the Minnesota Legislature in House File 613 and Senate File 765, making all solicitation charges gross misdemeanors, or if repeated, felony level crimes, plus recognizing trafficking charges as violent felony offenses deserving longer sentences.

Based on our experience, law updates are needed:

- ✓ **Sex Trafficking should be added to the list of “Violent Crimes” and Statutory Maximum sentences should be increased to reflect the lengthy criminal histories of some trafficking offenders.**
 - Sex trafficking involves violence to the victim by the trafficker and buyers. Where offenders have two or more convictions for offenses already designated as “violent crimes” (robbery, serious drug crimes, assaults) and are then convicted of Sex Trafficking, the changes presented would allow higher sentences to reflect this history and highly dangerous criminal activity.
 - 13 of the 25 traffickers charged in Stearns County so far have criminal history scores of 4-10 points; the Sentencing Guidelines call for more months in prison than the maximum penalty allowed under current law, meaning serious offenders are “maxed out” at 15-20 years in prison. Increasing statutory maximums by 5 years would allow for clearer and stronger sentences for career criminals, also allowing the Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines Commission to re-work the placement of sex trafficking offenses on the Sex Offender Grid.
- ✓ **Sex Buyers, including those caught repeatedly, should have increased sentences, and it’s time to change old distinctions between arranging to buy sex in public verses private places.** Demand drives the sex trafficking industry, and we have now caught numerous buyers multiple times. Further, current law makes a distinction between misdemeanor punishment for arranging to buy sex in a private place, and a gross misdemeanor penalty for arranging purchase in a public place; trafficking needs to be eradicated, not simply pushed out of the open. The Minnesota Court of Appeals, in a March, 2020 Kandiyohi County case agreed with the state’s argument that Minnesota’s public policy has evolved from prohibiting visible prostitution to combating human trafficking, but noted that the law has not kept up with technological changes such as arranging for sex via text messaging, which the court found was a “private” place (misdemeanor) verses a patron approaching a person on the street, a public place (a gross misdemeanor). The law needs to be changed to make all sex buying a gross misdemeanor, and allow buyers convicted twice within 10 years to be recognized as felony offenders.
- ✓ **Solicitation of Children to Engage in Sexual Conduct should be a 5 year, not a 3 year, felony.** Demand by adult offenders to solicit children 15 years and younger is triple the demand for adult victims, and solicitation of children is now only a 3-year felony. Offenders without significant criminal histories would be placed on probation, not committed to prison, but more than 3 years is needed to monitor these offenders posing a threat to children. Offenders who already have significant criminal histories should go to prison for up to 5 years, not just 3 years.
- ✓ **The penalty for trespassing at facilities providing shelter or transitional housing for sex trafficking victims and their children should be the same as protection for battered women’s shelters.** Facilities providing emergency shelter or transitional housing for sex trafficking victims and their children are locations where past, current or potential future traffickers may locate victims to recruit, harass, intimidate or harm them; these victims should have the same protection as those appropriately provided for victims of domestic violence and their children – both should be gross misdemeanor penalties.

